

BABB'S



Scott Feron, of Suffield, Conn., project manager for the Babb's Roller Rink restoration project points to an area of the former rink that will feature a new concession stand once renovations are complete. The former Babb's Roller Rink landmark has been closed since 1996 and has presently been under restoration for the past five years. (Photo by Frederick Gore)

Retro skating rink being rebuilt

By CHRIS PUTZ

Staff Writer

WEST SUFFIELD, CONN. -

There are distant sounds of Big Bands the likes of Artie Shaw and the Dorsey brothers wafting through the air across Congamond Lake as volunteers continue to resurrect one of the area's historical venues, Babb's Roller Skating Rink.

As one walks around the plywood, insulation, and windows piled high inside the old building, the dust settles and it becomes apparent that there is something magical at work here.

Slowly, but with much determination, volunteers have begun to restore the lakeside facility that once held ballroom dancing in the 1930's and - as the era of Big Bands faded - became a skating rink nearly a decade later.

A nail here, a timber there, and the structure slowly begins to resemble the one that brought generations of people from Southwick, West Suffield, and neighboring communities together under one roof.

Close to a half dozen or so volunteers have been contributing their time - mainly on weekends - for the past five years helping to restore Babb's Roller Skating Rink.

From pulling and hammering nails to sweeping or clearing debris to installing ledger boards and rafters, there is no project too tough for the team of volunteers that make-up Citizens Restoring Congamond.

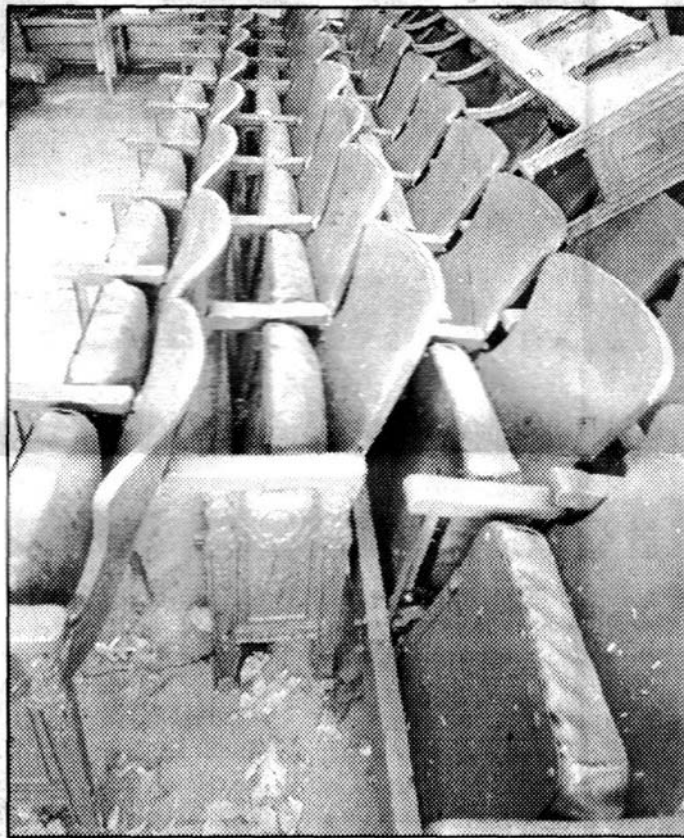
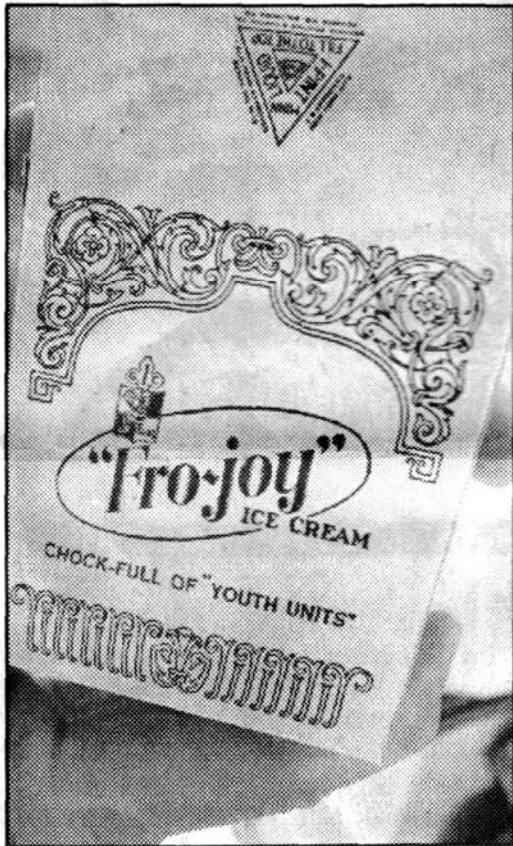
"I have a passion for quality craftsmanship which you don't see any more." said Scott Feron, who has donated his time for the last three years since an accident derailed his career. "And, now, to be involved with a project like this - I'm speechless." Feron is the site manager for the project.

Thus far, much of the structure has been gutted with non-conforming sheet rock and old wiring removed, and walls have been reframed as volunteers continue to recreate the outer shell of the building.



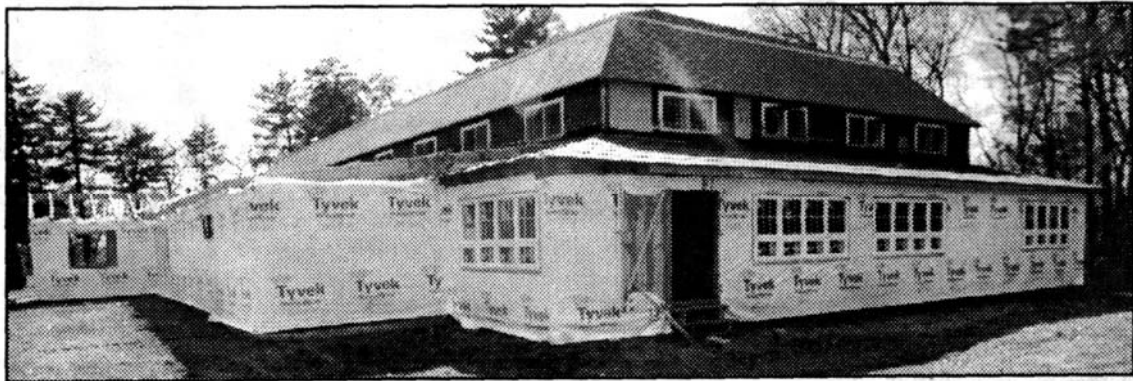
Memories set to come alive

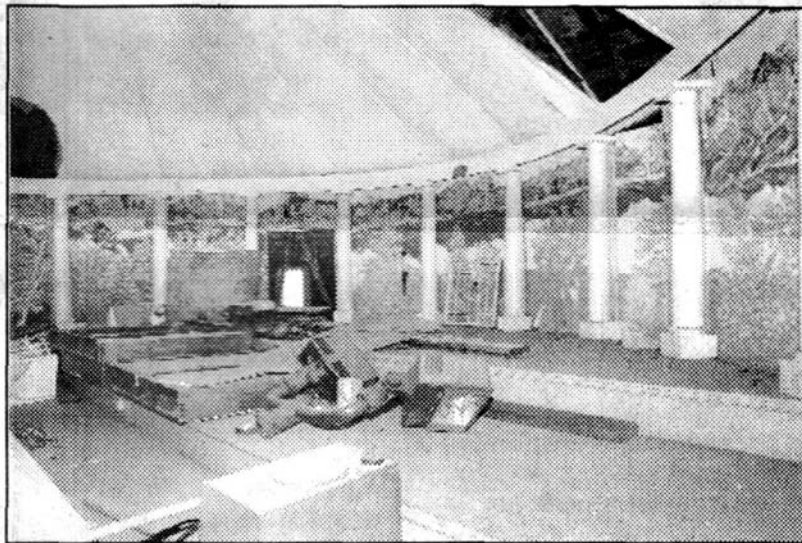
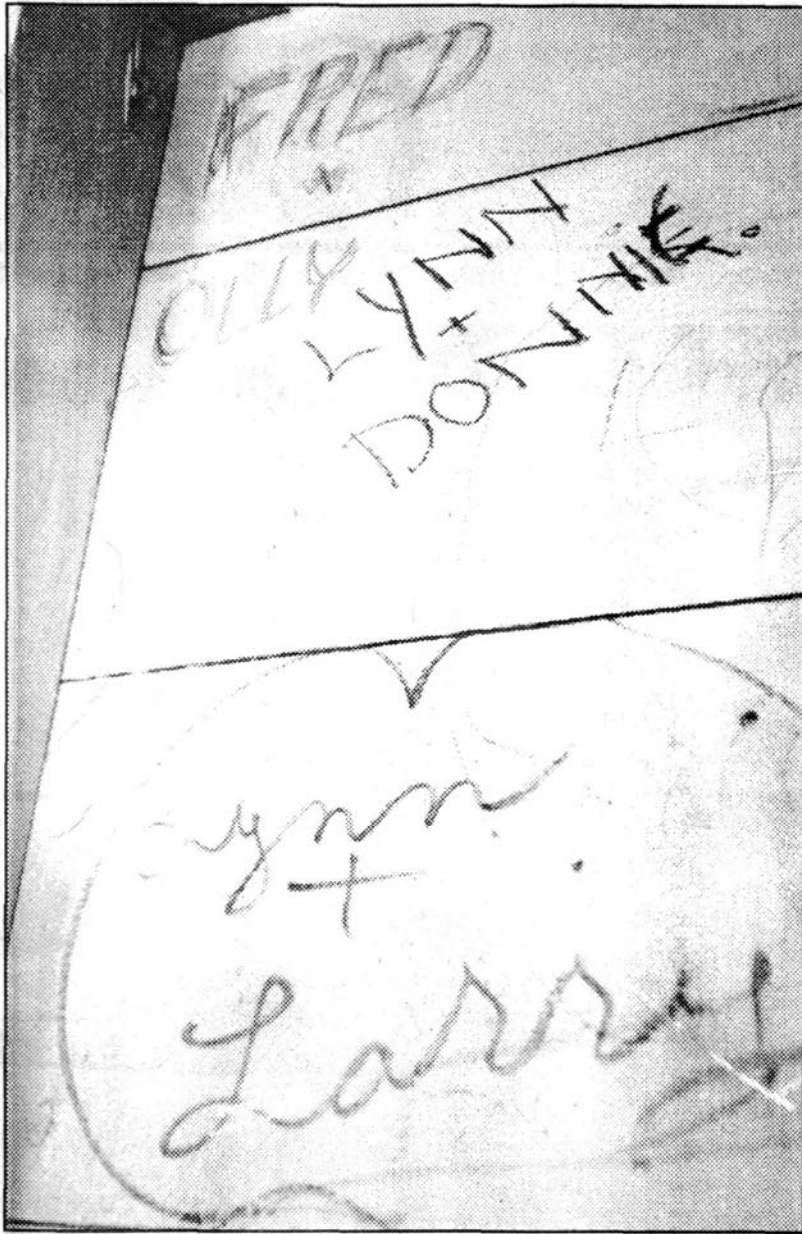
Above, a stockpile of construction material now fills the inside of Babb's Roller Rink in West Suffield, Conn., where hundreds of volunteers are working to restore the former landmark. Right, "sweetheart" graffiti from decades ago was revealed as the inside walls of the practice rink were dismantled for restoration. Below right, this stage was the home for many local bands which provided music for dancing at the site. Below center, the original seating that was first purchased by owner Nelson Babb and recently obtained from the Lincoln Theater in Springfield awaits restoration. Below left, hundreds of old serving containers were found when the concession stand was dismantled. (Photos by Frederick Gore)





Above, an old sign indicating Babb's Beach and dancing was discovered after volunteers cleaned an outside storage building. Right, workers continue to restore the "practice rink" room that will now be home to private parties. Below, work continues on the outside of the structure.





Grants and donations, in the form of materials and money, have enabled volunteers to further their efforts, but those monies have quickly eroded.

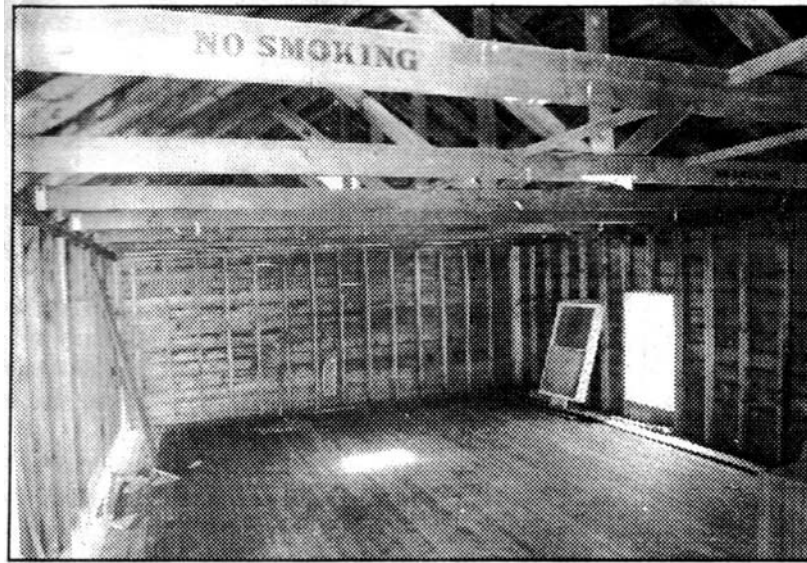
"We need \$900,000 more to finish the building," said Feron. "Residents of the area around the lakes don't want to see it go down the pipes."

If people, businesses, and the like come forward with financial donations and six to 10 volunteers continue to dedicate about 16 hours a weekend of their time for the next year or so, Feron said the roller skating rink, which closed in 1996, would reopen in October 2009.

With nearly 6,000 square feet and an occupancy of 1,108, Babb's Roll Skating is being redesigned as much more than just a skating rink.

According to design plans created by Tecton Architects, Inc., of Hartford, Conn., the rink is also expected to house lectures, exhibitions, movies, and dance productions. An activity room, gallery, two party rooms, arcade, snack bar, lounge, and skate rental area is planned.

LED lighting, neon lighting, and reflective lights are expected to enhance the setting. The facility will also be fully handicap-accessible.



But, at this point, the main concern for volunteers is removing the interior ceiling and the electrical wiring, a big undertaking, according to Feron.

"No one in their wildest dreams knew (this project) would be this involved," Feron said.

When the time comes, mechanical, electrical, and plumbing jobs will be bid out to contractors and will be the remaining focus of the project, in addition to the upper roof portion of the building.

For the time being, Citizens Restoring Congamond is planning a list of fund raising efforts to keep their dream of restoring Babb's alive.

Anyone wishing to become a volunteer is asked to contact Scott Feron at (860)-982-7342 or see www.babbsrink.org